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THE SUMNER'S TALE AND SAINT PATRICK'S PURGATORY

Sumner's Tale, ll. 1729-31.

'Delivereth out,' quod he, 'anon the soules;
Ful hard it is, with fleshhook or with oules
To been y-clawed, or to brenne or bake.'

The unscrupulous friar of the *Sumner's Tale* in haranguing for his trentals gives a picture of unusual purgatorial torments. Since the souls are to be relieved by masses they are of course in purgatory and not in hell. We wonder whether to serve his own ends the friar borrows from hell torments or whether such torments are sometimes found in purgatory.

There are two sets of torments mentioned, the second being of baking and burning. There is of course always fire in hell, in addition to cold, hunger, thirst, serpents, and so forth. These are always made as terrible as possible, with no lack of concreteness. Purgatorial torments, on the other hand, are often vague, with the exception of fire, which is almost always mentioned as in purgatory.¹ In the Bamberg Latin version and in Marie de France's French version of Saint Patrick's Purgatory souls are tormented in iron baking pans.² In the Middle English version in the *South English Legendary*, ll. 269-70,

Some op-on grediles of Ire: i-rostede weren also,
Some ase gyes, þe spites of Ire: þoruȝ-out heom i-do.³

The second type of torment, where the souls are clawed with fleshhooks and awls, is more curious, as it implies agents to administer it, who can hardly be anything but devils. This

¹ Augustine, *In Psalmum xxxvii*, verse 2 (*Patrologia Latina*, vol. xxxvi, col. 397); Dante, *Purgatorio*, canti 25-27; Legend of All Souls' Day, *S. Engl. Legendary*, E.E.T.S., O.S., vol. 87, p. 422, ll. 81 ff.; R. Rolle, *The Pricke of Conscience* (ed. R. Morris, Phil. Soc., Berlin, 1863), ll. 2972 ff., 3088 ff., 3344; *An Alphabet of Tales*, E.E.T.S., O.S., 127, p. 441; *Gast of Gy* (*Palaestra*, vol. I), ll. 664, 1695-1785.

² "In sartaginibus ferreis" (*Romanische Forschungen*, vi. 167); "Qui sur graillz erent rostiz" (ed. T. A. Jenkins). Cf. also the vision of purgatory described by a woman in 1422 (Horstmann's edit. of Richard Rolle, I. 387, 389.) —The writer owes this and various other notes and other help to Professor John S. P. Tatlock of Stanford University.

³ Similarly in the Auchinleck version, st. 79 (*Engl. Stud.*, I, 104).

torment with awls⁴ and fleshhooks is inflicted in hell by devils. In a Middle English version of the Vision of Saint Paul,⁵ the ninth torment has these:

In helle is a deop gayhol.
 þar-vnder is a ful hot pol.
 Ten þusend deoflen. and wel mo.
 þer doþ þe wrecche saulen wo.
 þat nymeþ eaules and heom to-tereþ.

In Robert of Brunne's *Handlyng Synne*⁶ we find a good example of the fleshhooks:

yn þat fyre saghe he lye
 Saulys brennyng, and ruly crye;
 þe fendes ȝede hem among,
 And fast echone on oþer þrong
 with brynnynge crokys sorowfully,
 And pyned hem with-oute mercy.

 Come a deuyl rennyng to hym
 with glesyng yȝen and croke yn hande,
 þe steme stode oute of hys mouþ brennand:
 he broght on þat brynnynge croke
 A brennyng soule þat al to-shoke.⁷

Devils are not regularly found in purgatory. They are inharmonious with the theological conception of a place of purification for saved souls; there are none in Dante's purgatory. In some visions, however, it is hard to tell which is purgatory and which is hell. Further, since it was believed that

⁴ This was a form of torture for the martyrs also: *Life of Saint Katherine*, E.E.T.S., O.S., 80, p. 108; *Life of Saint Blaise*, in the *South English Legendary*, E.E.T.S., O.S., 87, ll. 83-5.

Mid ropes him hengen on a tre. be-neþe ðer stode I-nowe
 Tormentours wið oules kene, ȝ al his fless to-drowe;
 as men wið combes wolles to-drauð, his fless þer-wið he tere.

⁵ *XI Pains of Hell*, in *Old English Miscellany*, E.E.T.S., O.S., 49, p. 153.

⁶ E.E.T.S., O.S., 119, ll. 2511 ff., 2524 ff. The passage is from the account of Fursey in Bede, but the detail is original.

⁷ Devils with hooks or crooks often appear in hell in the M. E. *Vision of Tundale* (ed. by Wagner, Halle, 1893, ll. 371-2, 720 ff., 1075, 1187); these particular instruments are not mentioned in the Latin *Visio Tnugdali*. Devils with iron hooks appear in the vision of *Thurchillus* in Roger of Wendover, *Flores historiarum* (Rolls Series) II.26; and in Dante's *Inferno*, xxi. 52-57 ff.; cf. also *Debate of the Body and Soul* (Mätzner, *Allengl. Sprachproben*, I, 101). In pictorial representations of hell such things are common.

they are common on earth, perhaps there is no theological reason why they should not be found in purgatory. In detailed accounts of purgatory agents of torture are needed; and devils are introduced by writers whose imagination is more developed than their theology. There are devils ("tortores," "dæmones") in purgatory in the Latin version of the Monk of Eynsham's vision (about 1196);⁸ souls are parched in baking pans ("in sartagine frigebantur") and drawn with hooks ("unguibus");⁹ awls are not mentioned. In the account of purgatory in Vincent of Beauvais' *Speculum Morale*, II, i. 11, devils are mentioned. He quotes from Petrus Cluniacensis two visions of knights punished purgatorially by demons, though not clearly in a local purgatory; and in his summary of Bede's account of the vision of Furseus we find devils in what Vincent, but not Bede, represents as purgatory.

The nearest parallel in accounts of purgatory to the torments mentioned by the friar is in *Saint Patrick's Purgatory*. This was the most popular and influential mediaeval poem on the subject. In all the versions devils abound. Among the torments specified in one of the three Middle English versions, that in the *South English Legendary*,¹⁰ there are several cases of awls and fleshhooks wielded by devils in purgatory.

heo jollen and grenneden on him foule: and strong
 fuyr bi-gonne for-to tiende;
 þis kniȝt heo bounden honden and fet: and a-midde þe
 fuyre him caste,
 With Irene Ovles and pikes: heo to-drowen
 him wel faste. (l. 168 ff.)

þis wrechche gostes weren so i-pinede: with Irene
 and with fuyre.

.
 þe deoulene ornen opon hem: and treden heom to þe
 grounde,

⁸ *Visio Monachi de Eynsham* (*Romanische Forschungen*, xvi), cap. xv, xxiv. This work apparently never got into the vernacular till the late fifteenth century.

⁹ Cap. xv, xvi. In cap. xvii it is plain that the place is purgatory, though the word is avoided. Devils are mentioned in connection with purgatory in Rolle, *Pr. of C.* 2902 ff.; *Gast of Gy*, 597 ff; i.e., they come to try to get the departing spirit, but they are not in purgatory.

¹⁰ Ed. by Horstmann, E.E.T.S., O.S., 87, ll. 168 ff., 203, 207-8, 211-12, 233-4, 247-8, 285.

And with Ovles swiþe kene: maden heom mani a wounde.

For ase wel beth þe schrewes in purgatorie: and ouer-al,
ase in helle,

And schullen for-to þe daiȝe of dome come: telle ȝwat men
telle.¹¹ (LL. 203, 207-8, 211-2.)

þe lufere gostes ornen al-so: a-boute heom i-nowe
With hokes and with ouȝles: a[nd] with gret eir
heom to-drowe. (233-4)

þe feondes ornen faste a-boute: fram ech oþur i-nowe
And heore wrechche flesch with oþur wo: mid Ovles
heom to-drowe. (L. 247-8.)

þis feondes wenden forth a-non: and heore hokes
þaron caste. (L. 285.)

At the mouth of hell:

heore Oules heo nomen and heore hokes: and
toward him casten an heiȝ. (L. 447.)

In the Auchinleck version devils with hooks are mentioned;¹² likewise in Marie de France's French and in the various Latin versions of the work, "od cros de fer," "uncis ferreis et vectibus longissimis," etc.¹³

In conclusion we may say that the friar tries to make purgatory as vivid and dreadful as possible, with the obvious motive of stirring people to give money for masses. It is conceivable that the Sumner might have had his friar borrow from accounts of hell, either ignorantly or deceitfully. But with the mediaeval interest in the other world, people were familiar with accounts of both places. It is likely that Chaucer reflected the popular, as opposed to a theologian's, idea of purgatory. It is not quite necessary to suppose that he reflects some single account; but if he does, none was so well known, none is so much like the

¹¹ This couplet shows that the writer expected surprise at the appearance of devils in purgatory.

¹² *Engl. Stud.* I. 103, 106, stanzas 73, 119.

¹³ *The Espurgatoire Saint Patriz of Marie de France*, ed. T. A. Jenkins (*University of Chicago Decennial Publications*, Ser. I, vol. vii, 235 ff.), ll. 891, 1149, 1258, 1396; *Zur Geschichte der Legende vom Purgatorium des heil. Patricius*, ed. Mall (*Rom. Forsch.* vi, 139 ff.), pp. 162, 167, 172, 175, 177. In the fifteenth century vision of purgatory mentioned already (in Horstmann's *Richard Rolle*. I, 387-8) devils use hooks for tearing the sinners, but not awls.

friar's account, as *Saint Patrick's Purgatory*. Of the three Middle English versions of this, the earliest, that in the *South English Legendary*, extant in four MSS, is nearest to the friar's account. It contains all his details, including the burning and baking, reiterates the awls and hooks, and is the one account of purgatory in any language, so far as observed, that mentions awls. One may perhaps add *Saint Patrick's Purgatory* to the small list of English works which Chaucer probably knew. It is likely enough that Chaucer remembered reading the work himself; yet there are other possible explanations of his knowledge. It is not improbable that he may have heard real preachers hold forth like this friar; the whole beginning and end of this tale are Chaucer's most vivid picture of fourteenth century village life.¹⁴

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¹⁴ The above is not the only reflection of popular vision literature in Chaucer's works. W. O. Sypherd shows some reason to think that the *House of Fame* is influenced (directly or indirectly) by some other-world visions beside the *Divine Comedy* (*Studies in Chaucer's H. F.*, pp. 68, 115). Cf. also H.F. III. 713. But there is more than this. Eolus in the *House of Fame* blows a smoke of evil fame from his trumpet:

And hit stank as the pit of helle (III, 564).

The visionary hell usually appears as a hideous pit ("puteus," "putte"), or at least contains a pit, and the stench is one of its chief horrors. E.g., Bede, *Eccles. Hist.*, V. 12 (vision of Drihthelm); *Purgatory of Saint Patrick*, ll. 309-10, 357-8, 362-3, 376-379, 406-12 (*S. E. Legendary*, E.E.T.S., O.S., 87; Auchinleck version, st. 107, 110, *Engl. Stud.* I, 105-6; all except one of these stinking pits are in purgatory, but in this work there is small distinction between the two places of torment); *XI Pains of Hell*, 227-8 (a M. E. version of the Vision of Saint Paul, *O.E. Misc.*, E.E.T.S., O.S., 49); Dante's *Inferno*, xi, 4-5, xxix (not likely to be Chaucer's chief source); *Book of Enoch* (Fritzsche in *Rom. Forsch.* II, 253); visions of Alberic, Tundale and Thurcill (Becker, *Mediaeval Visions of Heaven and Hell*, Baltimore, 1899, pp. 48, 77, 83, 89, 98); Vincent of Beauvais, *Speculum Historiale*, XXVIII, 96, *Spec. Mor.* II, i, 11; *De Babilonia civitate infernali*, by the Franciscan Jacomin da Verona (in Ozanam, *Documents Inédits*, pp. 304-5). Again, Eolus' trumpet utters a sound (III, 713).

As loude as belweth wynde in helle.

This recalls not only the winds in *Inferno* V and XXXIV, but those in Anglo-Saxon accounts of hell, in that of the Monk of Eynsham, and especially the high and bitter winds in *Saint Patrick's Purgatory* (E.E.T.S., O.S., 87, ll. 184, 245, 333, 339, 385, 415; *Engl. Stud.* I. 103-6; not all, but mostly, in purgatory). If it is worth while to single out a particular vision as source of the allusions in the *House of Fame*, *Saint Patrick's Purgatory* is again the most likely.